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Militant Anarchism and the Reality in Spain

Federica Montseny

1937

"They Shall Not Pass!"

They shall not pass! E'en should they win the day,

Their vict'ry turns to dust and ashes still;
What tho' the tyrants should our bodies slay,
The spirit free lives on and 'scapes their will.
It shall not be! Let them do what they may,
They shall not pass!

They shall not pass! E'en should they win the day,

When all have given their lives for liberty,
Tyrants will know the price they have to pay
T'enslave a people fighting to be free.
It shall not be! Let them do what they may,
They shall not pass!

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Quoted from a speech by Federica Montseny, Minister of
Public Health, at a C.N.T.-F.A.I. propaganda conference.

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They shall not pass! E'en should they win the day,

When men as yet unborn shall read the story,
They'll judge 'twixt those who stood in Freedom's
way,

And us who died for her; whose is the glory.
It shall not be! Let them do what they may,
They shall not pass!

What tho' with hireling hordes they burn and slay,

And stone built fortresses before them fall,
There's something stronger yet shall bar the way,
Our firm resolve that still defies them all.
Therefore we cry, "Let them do what they may,
They shall not pass!"

-From the Catalan of Apelles Mastres.

"I wish to say that we Anarchists have never changed our position. We are Anarchists as of old and still pursue the same ideals. In no part of the world before has Anarchism existed as we find it to-day in Spain. It is necessary for us to understand the manner in which the military putsch of July 19th was brought about and the impossibility of the events being foreseen.

"We tried many times before to speed on the social revolution in Spain; attempted to stir up the feelings of the people and to raise the banner of Libertarian Communism. Since the establishment of the Republic **we were the only ones who kept the masses alive; the only ones who remained faithful to their revolutionary creed.** Without our continued vigilance, Spain to-day would be very different. A timid democracy, a reformist socialism would have held back the masses. Our constancy, same might call it our madness, was necessary to wear down the oppressive forces of the old democracy which, in Spain, was a hundred years behind the times.

gatory. Love, as the basis of life will bind us together. But we must create in each person a sense of responsibility in order that each one of us can have the right to enjoy all his rights. This is an unique movement for us all, because circumstances to-day in Spain have never before existed during any other revolution. Neither the French nor the Russian revolution. To-day, a sense of sacrifice impels us to renounce our aspirations and individual interests for the well-being of all. It is this sense of responsibility which shows us the path of duty and assists us in performing it. In this way, we will avoid the fatal mistake of dictatorship. In Spain, we should have enough intelligence, enough sense of individual and collective responsibility to do for ourselves that which would be imposed upon us by a dictatorship. Very soon we will give to the world the example of a free land, that stood up without arms opposed, as a single man, to fascism, to the mentality of capitalism. It will be an example, worthy of being followed by the rest of the world. We are proud of our responsibility. The greatest joy of our lives is a determination to sacrifice all-to give all-that this dream will be realised-the union of the proletariat to obtain our fundamental aims:

BREAD AND FREEDOM FOR ALL!

”And then came the military revolt which, by the heroic action of the workers, was quelled. This action of the workers constitutes, perhaps one of the greatest events of the past years.

”After the Russian Revolution a strong movement of the masses developed in Spain, which is the best reply to fascism. **Spain Is the first and only nation to face up to fascism squarely** and to throw herself into a revolution that is genuinely Spanish, completely original, and having no relation with the Russian Revolution or the recent uprisings in Austria. I do not think I say too much when I say that **if the people had not been educated by us In a revolutionary manner, the popular reaction of the masses would not have been possible.** That is our triumph. It is the most precious laurel we, as Anarchists, treasure. **It is necessary to separate the ideal from the real at the point where the ideal becomes stationary and fixed.** An ideal which becomes stagnant, which has no flexibility, which has no adjustability, which cannot react and whose representatives cannot respond in accordance with circumstances such an ideal is destined to be set apart.

”**But we Spanish Anarchists had the capacity to do this.** Without departing from our Anarchist ideal and without renouncing its true meaning in face of the historical situation and the Spanish movement, we knew how to adapt ourselves. Authority is something from which we are constantly subtracting, of which there remains always a residue, and which we attempt to make smaller and smaller. This is the moral and physical principle which we Anarchists put into practice in Spain. For example, if on July 19th we had attempted, as we could have done, to proclaim Libertarian Communism in Catalonia, the results would have been disastrous, just as it would have been had a like attempt been made by the totalitarian communists or by the socialists. **Although It may be our aim, to attempt a total conquest at that time would have meant a broken front, and consequently failure. The fact Is that**

we were the first to modify our aspirations, the first to understand that the struggle against International fascism was In itself great enough. The struggle is so great that the triumph over fascism alone is worth the sacrifice of our lives. Fascism which desires to become the master of all those who are free in spirit, Everyone-from the most moderate Republican to the most extreme Anarchist-**has placed their hope and faith In the struggle which unites them.**

”There are Anarchists in other parts of the world who are unable to, comprehend the position of the Spanish Anarchists. I do not pretend to censor these Anarchists. For us, our position had to be one thing or the other. To continue in opposition, which would have been impossible under the circumstances, or to take our place as the circumstances commanded.

”And so in obedience to circumstances we entered the central government and the generalidad. **We think by doing so we will avoid a repetition of the fate of the Anarchist movement in other countries where other organisations assumed the direction of the revolution to the detriment of the Anarchists.** This cannot take place in Spain because of our determined action, because of the constructive significance we are giving to the revolution inspired by the ideals of Anarchism.

”No one but ourselves can realise the extraordinary human effort it represented for those who, individually and collectively, for more than a century have specialised in criticism and opposition, **to become transformed suddenly from a destructive to a constructive force.** A system we had vowed to destroy and which we frankly did not think would crumble so soon in Spain fell so quickly that **when the moment came we were left somewhat confused** before the fundamental practical problems of economic order facing us. And it was our good fortune that among all the forces fighting fascism **in spite of the defects, the failures, the errors and inexperience in that critical hour, we constituted a**

There is, therefore, no solution possible other than an economy directed by the workers through their organisations of control-through the workers’ syndicates. In the political sense, federalism will provide us with the structure whereby each region can organise its own life according to its natural resources, With the political unity of the new Spain established on a basis of federalism and with the guarantee of the intrinsic rights of the workers, the economic unity of the working class imposes itself as a matter of course. Thus the proletarian organisations which, formerly, were directed against capitalism will be converted into administrative organisations of the new economy.

The ideological differences between the C.N.T. and the U.G.T. are bound to disappear under the common purpose of the working class. The union of these two great syndicates for the new economy will constitute an unique effort for the formation of a workers, directed economy. The directed economy of Roosevelt was aborted by the capitalist class which is not capable of making sacrifices. In Russia, Communist Party administration has succeeded in reconstructing economy-but at the cost of a dictatorship and the submission of a whole people to mere obedience. It is our idea to construct a society directed by the workers’ organisations having the complete control of the economic wealth of the land.

In order to fully realise our aspirations, we must create in the masses of the people the sense of sacrifice and responsibility that has been the characteristic of the anarchist movement throughout its historic development in Spain, It will be this spirit of sacrifice that will enable us to overcome all the difficulties and bear all the privations that will be necessary for the realisation of the new economic reconstruction, The greatest individual austerity and a complete sense of responsibility is necessary for the fulfilment of our aims.

The love of liberty and the sense of human dignity are the basic elements of the Anarchist creed. We need no messiah and no sterile conception of a god menacing us with hell and pur-

of the working class. There is no longer any question of reconstructing Spain, after the civil war, on a basis of private property. Our land, ravaged by destruction, will demand untold sacrifices. There are vast tracts of land mutilated by shells and bombs; territories, under the heel of the fascists, which are uncultivated, due to the passive resistance of the peasants; and there is the incalculable destruction of the whole economy of the land. All this will demand an intense organisation of production under responsible and efficient administration.

An economy directed by the workers alone can solve this problem. The workers will be prepared to sacrifice all for the triumph of the revolution. They will work eight-ten-twelve-or more hours per day, if need be, in order to intensify production and reconstruct, as quickly as possible all that has been destroyed by the war. Knowing that it is, for the welfare of their children, the workers will respond enthusiastically to all the demands made upon them. They will work with the same intensity with which to-day they are fighting against Franco and Mola for their redemption from ages of slavery. A slavery that has made them always the victims of private interests.

That is why a fascist victory is impossible. Because it must not be forgotten that this is not only a civil war-a social war is also being waged. It is the war of the common people against the rich, against the militarists, against the politicians-all of whom were responsible for the misery and poverty of the proletariat. The political parties were incapable of creating a new moral value in Spain and were unable to oppose the military conspirators. They were mere accomplices of the traitor generals.

No! the people of Spain will never consent to work again for capitalist interests. People who freely endanger their lives for a common cause do not take payment in money. They will demand their rights and their freedom, and will take over the direction of their own destiny. Rights for which they have struggled and conquered.

force that knew from where It came and to where It was going.

"Because of all this, because of the magnitude of the struggle, because of the new and varying problems created daily and increased by the constant reinforcements received by the enemy from international fascism, it was necessary to create among us a constructive and practical sense imposed by reality.

"Ah! allow me at this moment to express a little of the bitterness that I feel! Let me tell the Anarchists of all the world! Those Anarchists who have not understood us and those who have criticised us deeply! It is necessary to live in Spain and experience the reality before forming an opinion. If all our comrades of Europe, America and other countries, who do not understand what we are doing to Spanish Anarchism, would come to Spain, we could then see how they would react. If they had been here we would have seen how they reacted before the events which have occurred and before realities, very different from anything we ever dreamed of.

"The ideals are the same but at times, one has to change even one's opinion of facts. For instance, no one could have foreseen that we would have simultaneously revolution and war. Not a civil war like those of the past, where the forces were equal; but a modern war in which we were the worst equipped, etc. **Our men poorly armed, without plans, could not fight against armies perfectly equipped according to the standards of to-day, and reinforced by regular forces from Italy and Germany**, specialists in warfare, and with an iron discipline which made it impossible for them to retreat. One does not see the size of a mountain until one draws away from it. But away in the distance we turn and look and wonder. Have we really come so far? How did we manage to overcome so many serious difficulties in such a cruel and unequal struggle?

"But now a still greater problem faces us. A problem besides which the problem of the war seems easy. For the war, a common cause against a common enemy, made it possible to have

and to **maintain the unity of all the anti-fascist forces-Republicans, Socialists, Communists and Anarchists.**

”But imagine the panorama once the war is over with the different ideological forces that will attempt to impose themselves, one against the other. The war over, the problem will rise in Spain with the same characteristics as it had in France and Russia. We must prepare ourselves now. **We must declare our point of view so that the other organisations, will know what to expect.** . . . We must look for the platform, for the point of contact which will permit us with the greatest amount of freedom, and with a minimum plan of economical realisation to continue on our road until we reach the goal.

”We have already spoken of what we want, once the war is ended. What we say to-day we said before the war, Something consubstantial with the very history of Spain, with the aspirations of the people manifested in every moment of their lives. Every historic movement of Spain has affirmed always the attitude of the people against a central and absorbing power. Against imperialism, against arrogance and tyranny. Wherever we turn, we find the same racial opposition to oppression and humiliation, by any power whatsoever. That is why it has been difficult for any dictatorship to be set up in Spain. When it was implanted it was more like an operetta. And when the attempt arose to establish a real dictatorship the people rose in rebellion, preferring death to slavery.

The socialists have inherited a centralist tendency as a consequence of the authoritarian teachings of Marx. But they must adapt themselves to the reality in Spain as we have done with the teachings of Bakunin.

The republicans are, of necessity, federalists, since federalism is the essence of all democracies. And, lastly, we anarchists who have created the ideal and the conception of the individual from the social cell that is man, are federalists.

Consequently, when the war is over, a plebiscite will be taken in each region through public assemblies, to decide by popular expression:

1. The form of political unity through which the new Spain will be constituted.
2. The form of economic unity which will direct the destiny of the new Spain.

And we will accept the creation of the Iberian Federation of a socialist republic which will give each region the right to construct its life in accordance with its economic possibilities and political preponderance. From this confederal conception and from this federal interpretation of the regional necessities will evolve, for the first time, a really great and strong Spain.

Until now Spain has been a country with an enormous, richly adorned head-Madrid. But the lacerated body were the regions without water; regions lacking the elemental necessities of life. Only in the regions around the coast has there been material progress, as a result of their contact with the outside world: and what autonomy they did have was due to their distance from Madrid. When regions like Extremadura, Andalusia, Galicia, Aragon and Levante become federated, we will see the end of the tragic emigration of some of the best men who go to seek their fortune in other lands. In the freely federated autonomous regions there will be ample opportunity to employ their initiative and capabilities on their native soil. And it is then that a new Spain will be created. The Spain pregnated by Primo de Rivera and the Republic of 14th April, but never realised. The impoverished and unproductive regions of Castille, Extremadura and Andalusia bear sad witness to the failure of a centralised political doctrine.

On the economical side we have been elaborating a definite constructive programme having as its basis the economic unity